

**TOP FY 2000
Project Narrative**

Crisis Services of North Alabama

**Grant # 01-60-00018
Huntsville, AL**

1. PROJECT PURPOSE (See Appendix 1.)

Susan, a 29 year-old mother of three recently laid off from her job, is seeking assistance paying her utility bill. She contacts Catholic Center of Concern and is told they are out of funds. They suggest she go to Community Action Agency the next morning where she is again told that no funds are available. They suggest she call Churches United for People where she is told there is a two-week waiting list. By this time, her utilities will be disconnected.

Problem: Barriers to knowledge about the services available in Madison County. In the Community Needs Assessment conducted in late 1999 by United Way of Madison County, respondents to the Household Survey indicated that while services currently exist in the community to meet their needs, they have little or no knowledge of those services. The top seven needs identified are support for anxiety, stress or depression; assistance with budgeting; prescription assistance; need for clothing and shoes; help with children/teenagers exhibiting behavioral or emotional problems; legal aid; and food assistance. While there are many agencies within Madison County that address these needs, the agencies have little or no money to market their services. Very few agencies have staff with the knowledge and skills to maximize the resources of the various media outlets that can help them get their messages out using public service announcements, news reports and other economical vehicles.

Solution: The HELPnet Public Education Campaign. With unprecedented support from local media – television, radio and print – the innovative HELPnet Public Education Campaign will help to overcome the barrier to knowledge about community services and resources. The goal of the campaign is to make HELPnet a household word.

Outcome: Increase in the number of community residents that know about services and resources available.

Problem: Barriers to accessing services available in Madison County. 806 of Madison County's 985 square miles are made up of rural areas and small communities. There is no public transportation system except a very limited Shuttle Bus service that circuits only the downtown and central areas of the City of Huntsville. Without a central point of contact, consumers of system services may have to drive all over the county to find an agency or organization that can meet their needs.

Solution: The HELPnet system and network of information kiosks and workstations. HELPnet will include a comprehensive information and referral system, available in both English and Spanish, written at a fourth grade level and featuring easily recognizable graphic symbols. Information kiosks will also have telephones that connect directly to HELPline (24-hour community crisis line) or the agency from which the user is seeking assistance. The system will be continually updated to include current information such as the number of beds available in homeless shelters; funds available for assistance with rent, utilities and prescriptions; contacts for and locations of support groups; and ongoing community initiatives. It will also contain information about government services and community volunteer opportunities. The network of at least 50 touch-screen kiosks and workstations, strategically located throughout the county in places regularly frequented by consumers of community services, will ensure that information on the HELPnet database is available to all residents regardless of location, economic status or telephone and computer ownership. The HELPnet website will provide links to government, health and human service, public safety, educational and cultural websites.

Outcome: Increase in the number of community residents accessing services and resources.

Problem: Service providers'/community leaders' lack of access to timely information regarding availability of agency resources and community initiatives. Madison County has over 125 non-profit organizations and a number of governmental entities constantly engaging in and developing innovative and problem-solving initiatives. One of the community's greatest challenges is staying abreast of these initiatives, often resulting in duplication of services and inefficient use of funds.

Solution: HELPnet's partnership with the Madison County Coordinating Council for Children and Families. In an effort to improve coordination and communication, community leaders have come together, with assistance from the U. S. Department of Justice, to form the Madison County Coordinating Council for Children and Families. Founders of the council, initiated in February 2000, made up of representatives from law enforcement, government, justice system, social service agencies, as well as consumers of local services, have identified as a critical need a central point of contact for updating and disseminating information about community initiatives. HELPnet will be that point of contact.

Outcome: Elimination of service duplication and identification of gaps in existing services resulting better coordination and higher quality services for end users.

2. INNOVATION

Although many projects previously funded by NTIA include goals similar to those in this proposal, research indicates that no other project includes a number of the innovations designed for HELPnet. The project is built upon many of the efforts and experiences of previous TIAP award recipients, such as IMPACT in Lake County, Illinois; COZIN in Providence, Rhode Island; Lansing, Michigan's In Touch with Greater Lansing; and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. HELPnet also builds upon existing information and referral systems such as INFOLINE, the cutting edge information and referral program for the Los Angeles area, and employs the AIRS/INFOLINE Taxonomy of Human Services. HELPnet builds upon and extends their work in the following ways: 1) implementing a comprehensive public education campaign with significant commitment from major local media outlets; 2) employing a large and diverse partnership including media, corporate and business partners, social service agencies, governmental entities, law enforcement and schools; 3) connecting end users to an agency that can assist them or as a last resort to HELpline, a 24-hour telephone crisis line, ensuring a caring, compassionate voice when HELPnet-generated information doesn't meet their needs; 4) establishing community ownership of HELPnet by initiating an "Adopt a HELPnet Kiosk" campaign similar to the nationally recognized "Adopt a Mile" campaign; 5) establishing HELPnet internships for students in local colleges and universities; and 6) developing a website template, common interface and forms engines for non-profit agencies participating in HELPnet so end-users access sites that are uniform in appearance and easy to use.

3. DIFFUSION POTENTIAL

The problems addressed by HELPnet are common to communities throughout the country. Crisis Services of North Alabama staff have repeatedly heard concerns expressed by colleagues at the national (Annual Convening of Crisis Intervention Personnel), regional (Blue Ridge Institute for Southern Executives) and state (Alabama Alliance of Information and Referral Systems) levels. The project's massive media-driven Public Education Campaign ensures that HELPnet will become a household word and that everyone will want to use it, eliminating the possibility of stigmatizing users. The diversity of HELPnet partners increases community ownership of the project and ensures its existence far beyond the grant period. The development of a website template, Alabama Live's commitment to host non-profit websites at no charge, and Madison Research Corporation's commitment to technical assistance combine to guarantee that sites will be more uniform and easier for end users to access. Building on available technology and software, HELPnet will be easy to replicate. It will also provide a model to assist other communities in "thinking outside the box" when developing diverse community partnerships, such as the Madison County Coordinating Council on Children and Families, to meet the needs of underserved populations.

Disseminating information about the implementation, outcomes, successes and lessons learned will take place in a number of ways including: 1) a description of the HELPnet project and of TOP, including contact information such as telephone numbers and email addresses, will be posted on the HELPnet website; 2) other websites, including the National Children's Advocacy Center, Alabama Live, state and Congressional representatives and the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce will establish links to HELPnet; 3) proposals for workshops detailing the project and its outcomes will be submitted to national, regional and state conferences, including the Annual Convening of Crisis Intervention Personnel, the National Symposium on Child Sexual Abuse (hosted by HELPnet partner, the National Children's Advocacy Center), the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Conference, NTIA/TOP conferences and the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems; 4) articles will be submitted to newsletters such as those published by Crisis Services of North Alabama, the National Children's Advocacy Center, the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Alabama Coalition Against Rape and the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems; and 5) information will be posted on national listservs, including CAVnet (Communities Against Violence) and SARnet (Sexual Assault Response).

4. PROJECT FEASIBILITY (See Appendix 2.)

Technical Approach. As previously mentioned, HELPnet will employ a network of touch-screen kiosks and computer workstations strategically placed throughout Madison County to provide users with access to information about community services in an understandable format. The touch-screen kiosks are designed for users who have little or no experience with information systems. HELPnet will be web-based using applications that are platform-independent and exemplify *interoperability*.

Interoperability of systems as well as technology will be an innovative feature of HELPnet. Interfacing with a new case management system currently under development by the SHOCAP Project of the Huntsville Police Department, Juvenile Court System and the Madison County Department of Human Resources in partnership with other agencies, HELPnet will assist in identifying community needs in specific areas of the county. HELPnet will also interface with new statewide systems being developed by the Alabama Alliance of Information and Referral Systems and the Alabama Employment Service's Career Center, linking Madison County residents with resources statewide.

While final decisions about information and referral software have not been made, HELPnet will build on existing programs. Those under consideration are versatile and easy-to-use. The programs have many features including those that allow for multiple simultaneous services searches; fast, powerful searches using keywords, taxonomy, agency or program names; user-defined searches, including simple questions or phrases, using any field or combination of fields; and creation of Internet keyword search pages for consumers accessing HELPnet via the Internet.

Although none of the technologies employed by HELPnet can by itself be considered cutting-edge or new technology, the combination of the kiosk/workstation community-wide network, multi-agency website development and linkages, information & referral system software to collect and maintain human resources information and services, and interfaces with other community-based and statewide systems will result in a unified delivery system.

While a number of *technical alternatives* were examined, an Internet Server operating with the most current Windows technology was chosen. The dynamic nature of the technology will facilitate easy updates of the information and provide a robust environment for HELPnet user interface design.

The growth potential or *scalability* of HELPnet is multilateral. The system can be expanded on several levels including: 1) the number of agencies and services listed in the HELPnet information and referral program; 2) the breadth of information that can be added to the system; 3) the number of kiosks and workstations in the network; and 4) the geographical area served. CSNA currently serves five North Alabama counties – Madison, Jackson, Limestone, Marshall and Morgan – and plans to extend the HELPnet system to the other counties following the project implementation and pilot period in the Madison County. Because many residents of North Alabama work in one county and live in another, CSNA staff envision a network of kiosks and workstations throughout the area to provide information about community resources and services intra- and inter-county.

A Technical Advisory subcommittee of the Stakeholders Committee will provide technical assistance in *maintaining the system*. The members of the subcommittee will continue to assess the effectiveness of HELPnet technology and will research new opportunities to upgrade the system and incorporate advances in technology, as appropriate.

Applicant Qualifications. HELPnet partners represent a broad range of community services providers, state and local government agencies, neighborhood organizations, businesses and corporations, and others. Crisis Services of North Alabama, Inc. (CSNA) is the applicant and will implement and administer the project in conjunction with its major partners. CSNA is a private non-profit with over 27 years of service to the people of North Alabama. CSNA operates a 24-hour crisis line, community resources service, rape response program, domestic violence shelters and other related services. Specific qualifications of CSNA, its major partners – the National Children’s Advocacy Center, Madison Research Corporation, The University of Alabama Institute of Social Science Research, City of Huntsville and Intergraph Corporation – and its staff are listed in Appendix 3.

Budget, Implementation Schedule, and Timeline. The thirty-month HELPnet budget includes a TOP grant of \$ 361,992 with a match of \$ 406,133 provided by CSNA and partners for a total thirty-month budget of \$768,125. (See Appendix 4 for implementation schedule and timeline.)

Sustainability. Beyond the grant period, HELPnet will be sustained in the following ways: 1) A contract with United Way of Madison County, separate from CSNA’s agency allocation, will fund the continuing update and upgrade of the information and referral program; 2) the “Adopt a HELPnet Kiosk” Program will involve not only the purchase of a kiosk but also the ongoing maintenance; 3) agencies, organizations and businesses hosting HELPnet workstations will commit to maintaining the hardware; 4) agency liaisons will agree to provide up-to-date information; and 5) extra attention to easy maintainability during the development of HELPnet will ensure low costs beyond the grant period.

5. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT (See Appendices 3 and 5)

HELPnet Partnerships. Over the past three years, more than 50 agencies and programs have come together as part of *One by One: A Safe Kids/Safe Streets Initiative*, a project of the National Children’s Advocacy Center, to identify and prioritize needs in the community. (CSNA is a subcontractor and a full partner in the *Safe Kids/Safe Streets Initiative*.) An outgrowth of this initiative is the Madison County Coordinating Council for Children and Families. HELPnet builds on these existing efforts to share information and resources within Madison County. The success of HELPnet is rooted in the collaborative efforts of government, non-profit agencies, community-based organizations and individuals throughout the community. Supporting HELPnet partners, **numbering over 40**, will participate in the following ways: 1) agencies will provide information about their services and commit to keeping that information current by assigning a staff member as a HELPnet liaison; 2) resident councils and community associations will identify end users who will provide information about their needs and the accessibility and effectiveness of HELPnet in meeting those needs; and 3) a HELPnet Stakeholders Committee, consisting of business leaders, agency representatives and end users will provide technical assistance to the project and serve in an advisory capacity.

Partners have identified many ways in which **consumers** of community services will **benefit** as a result of HELPnet. These benefits include better service provision and coordination for their clients and up-to-date and accurate referrals to other services. As previously mentioned, one of the most beneficial aspects of HELPnet is the capacity to eliminate duplication of services and identify gaps in existing services ensuring the quantity and quality of programs available to end-users.

Involvement of the Community. During the *Safe Kids/Safe Streets Community Vision Process* in 1998, several needs emerged, including the need to find more ways to share information about available services, the need to use technology more efficiently to benefit end users, and the need for agencies to collaborate more closely. Beginning in November 1998, the *Safe Kids/Safe Streets Initiative* sponsored a series of meetings to gauge the interest of the community in the TIAP program. As a result of these meetings, a team formed to research other programs, survey agencies and individuals, conduct meetings and focus groups and develop a project plan. This team selected CSNA as the lead agency for the project. Subsequently, the project proposed in this application was also named one of the top ten issued selected at the 2nd *Annual Community Vision Summit* in 1999. Focus groups, surveys, the 1999 Homeless Survey/Count organized to collect data for Madison County's Continuum of Care for the Homeless, and the United Way Needs Assessment have confirmed that most individuals, especially those in need, do not know what services are available and how to access them. The focus groups, surveys and needs assessment conducted with police officers, public housing tenants, health clinic clients, volunteers and staff of social service agencies and the homeless have been used to determine and define the types of information required for HELPnet, as well as the system design and locations of HELPnet kiosks and workstations. An End-users subcommittee of the Stakeholders Committee with members including public housing resident council representatives, members of neighborhood civic organizations, domestic violence survivors, and recipients of Healthy Families services will provide ongoing input to the Stakeholders Committee and HELPnet staff.

Support for End Users. HELPnet, written at a fourth-grade level and employing easily recognizable graphic symbols and touch-screen capability, will be easy to use and require minimal instruction. Because the marketing plan will include strategies to eliminate stigmatization for using the system, slogans such as *HELPnet is not only for those who need help but also for those who want to help* will be a vital part of the Public Education Campaign. Additionally, HELPnet will provide education and support for end users in the following ways: 1) the innovative Public Education Campaign will provide community-wide education about the availability, accessibility and ease-of-use of HELPnet, especially designed to reduce the anxiety levels of those with computer- or techno-phobia; 2) printed materials describing HELPnet with an easy-to-use graphically designed guide will be available at all kiosks and workstations, be printed in local newspapers and be distributed through schools, agencies, government offices and other outlets; and 3) end users will get on-site support from HELPnet Helpers, staff and volunteers specially trained to provide information and assistance. Training will be ongoing during the grant period.

Privacy. Because the data collected at the kiosks and workstations will be primarily statistical in nature, privacy will not be a significant issue. No confidential or individually identifiable information will be maintained on the HELPnet system. Specific information collected about users for evaluation or other purposes will be given on a voluntary basis. Kiosks and workstations will be placed with privacy and security as a main concern. As HELPnet expands, addressing privacy and confidentiality issues will remain a top priority.

6. REDUCING DISPARITIES

HELPnet is specifically designed to address the “digital divide.” NTIA’s report, *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, concludes that, “Establishing and supporting community access centers, among other steps, will help ensure that all Americans can access new technologies.” With at least 50 HELPnet “access centers” and HELPnet available on the World Wide Web via the Internet, every resident in and visitor to Madison County will have access to a wide array of information about community resources.

Description and Documentation of the Disparities. In addition to being identified as the top concern locally, lack of information about available assistance in Alabama is well documented. *Welfare Dependency: Not a Factor in Alabama*. This fact sheet, distributed by Alabama Arise and funded by the Ford Foundation, identified one of the top three problems the poor in Alabama face as *the lack of information on transitional assistance families can get*.

According to the U. S. Census Bureau’s *Income and Poverty: 1994 Income Summary*, the national average personal income per capita in 1994 was \$16,555. Of Madison County’s 20 zip codes, 13 fell below the national average in 1994. (See Appendix 6.) The U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that in 1998, Alabama ranked 40th in the nation with a per capita personal income of \$21,442.

According to the *U. S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 1999*, “children living in the South were less likely than those living elsewhere to have a computer at home.” In the same report, people 18 years and older were less likely than those elsewhere in the country to use a computer and the Internet at home. *The Huntsville Times* reported on March 28, 1999, that in “15 Huntsville elementary and two middle schools have qualified for extra federal money for the last three years. That’s because more than 75 percent of their students qualify, on the basis of family income, for free or reduced-price school lunches.”

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Access. HELPnet is Madison County’s solution to overcoming the barriers identified by participants in focus groups, surveys, needs assessment and vision summits. To determine the best location for the kiosks and workstations within underserved areas, input was sought from social service agencies and the consumers of their services. Focus groups of clients identified key public sites that would be most convenient to access the needed information. Agencies also provided feedback on where the HELPnet stations should be located to best serve their clients. This valuable input helped to determine the optimal locations for the information kiosks and workstations. At least 50 kiosks and workstations will be strategically located throughout Madison County. (See Appendix 7 for map.)

In addition to the geographical and economic barriers to information access, a psychological barrier exists. Not surprisingly, participants in focus groups revealed a lack of knowledge of, and experience with, and in some cases, a downright fear of computers. To overcome this, kiosks will have touch-screen capabilities. As previously discussed, an extensive Public Education Campaign is planned that will emphasize the system's ease of use, so users with reading difficulties and computer phobia will be comfortable using the kiosks. HELPnet Helpers will also be available at various locations to provide assistance to end-users.

Susan walks into Lucky's Supermarket, sees the HELPnet kiosk, requests utility assistance information and is immediately provided with a list of agencies that have funds available today. She touches the entry marked Salvation Army, picks up the kiosk telephone and is connected to them for assistance.

7. EVALUATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Evaluation of HELPnet will focus on the problem areas, solutions and outcomes listed in Appendix 1 of this document. Evaluators will make use of information gathered at the outset of the project and at timely intervals thereafter. By obtaining initial then regularly updated information, they can assess the nature of the problem, the degree of success in implementing the solution, and the effectiveness of the solution in overcoming the problem. Much of this data will be collected from those seeking help as they move through the system but additional information, which will describe the effects on the service system as it responds to foreseen changes in demand, will be gathered from service agencies. The evaluation will be done according to *Technology Opportunities Program Evaluation Guide* standards.

Two general topics of project information will be gathered for evaluation: 1) **implementation**, which includes monitoring progress of project milestones and monitoring use and effectiveness of program components; and 2) **outcomes**, which includes measuring increase in access to services and measuring increase in use of services.

Implementation. Referring to Appendix 8, evaluation of project implementation will examine how well Inputs and Activities were coordinated to produce predicted outputs. Interviews with end-users and HELPnet Helpers will show how effectively placed and maintained were kiosks and workstations. By analyzing data gathered at kiosks and workstations and during intake interviews at service providers, evaluators can monitor the success with which project staff have developed and disseminated information contained in HELPnet. Surveys of HELPnet Helpers and agency service providers will indicate ongoing opportunities and deficiencies in our provision of information to those in need.

Outcomes. The degree to which economic and geographical barriers to information have been overcome, resulting in increased community knowledge and usage of services available, will be evaluated using several sources of information. Intake records from area agencies will determine if increases in usage have occurred. Likewise, interviews and intake records can detect increases in use of multiple services. These same sources, when added to surveys of service providers, can measure increases in referrals. This would signify improvement in agency awareness and

cooperation resulting from the implementation of HELPnet. Data by zip code at HELPnet kiosks and workstations and at participating agencies will show if we are overcoming barriers to information. A survey of referring users such as police, churches, and businesses will portray the degree to which HELPnet increases their access to timely information about agency services and community initiatives.

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Alabama will provide consultation on the evaluation methodology to be implemented in this project. The Institute will also provide analysis of collected data and work with HELPnet project management to develop reports and recommendations concerning project modifications based on evaluation results.